How to Train Performance So It Holds Up Under Pressure

A practical breakdown of what actually changes performance — and how to train it

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What This Guide Is (And Is Not)

Most athletes already understand the problem.

You've felt the difference between how you perform in training and how you perform in competition. You've likely tried to address it by focusing more, thinking differently, or trying to manage your performance in the moment.

This guide is not another explanation of why that gap exists.

It is a breakdown of how to actually train the part of performance that determines whether your ability shows up when it matters.

What this guide focuses on:

- How to train attention so it stays usable under pressure
- How to regulate your system without stepping out of performance
- How to stay engaged in intensity instead of being disrupted by it
- How to remain connected to the moment instead of forcing outcomes

What this guide is not:

- A set of quick fixes for competition
- A mindset or confidence strategy
- Something that replaces your sport training

This is about training the layer that sits underneath all of that.

> **Performance isn't just about ability.**
> **It's about whether your ability is accessible under pressure.**

HOW TO USE THIS (IMPORTANT)

Before getting into the training itself, it's important to understand how to approach it.

These are not things you "turn on" in competition.

They are trained within practice, repeatedly, until they become part of how your system operates.

A simple way to approach this:
In your training sessions, you are no longer only asking:

"Did I execute well?"

You are also asking:

- What happened to my attention in that moment?
- Did I carry anything from the previous rep?
- Was I forcing or was I connected?

> **You are not just training performance.**
> **You are training the system that supports it.**

CAPACITY 1: STABILIZING ATTENTION

Most athletes don't experience attention as something unstable. They experience it as moments where they "lose focus," start thinking more, or feel slightly off. But if you slow performance down, what's actually happening is more specific.

In competition, attention often shifts in subtle but important ways:

- after a mistake, part of your attention stays on the previous play
- in key moments, it moves ahead to what might happen next
- during execution, it can turn inward toward mechanics

None of these shifts feel dramatic, but even small changes in attention affect perception, timing, and decision-making. This is why performance can feel off without anything clearly being wrong.

Most athletes respond by trying to focus harder or "lock in." This usually creates one of two patterns:

- attention becomes too narrow, often centered on mechanics or outcomes, leading to tension and forced execution
- focus comes in short bursts—it's there briefly, then fades—resulting in inconsistency from moment to moment

In both cases, the issue isn't effort. It's stability.

What you are actually training is something more specific:

- the ability to recognize where your attention is
- the ability to bring it back quickly
- and the ability to do that without disrupting performance

This is a subtle skill, but it has a direct impact on consistency.

The starting point is awareness. In a quiet setting, choose a single anchor such as your breath, a visual point, or a sound, and hold your attention there for two to three minutes.

What becomes clear very quickly is how often attention drifts. It may:

- move into thought
- shift to something else
- partially stay while partially leaving

Most athletes underestimate how frequently this happens. The goal here is not to improve focus yet, but to become aware of how attention behaves and what pulls it away.

Once that awareness is established, the next step is bringing it into movement. During a simple activity—whether it's footwork, stickhandling, or another controlled drill—maintain attention on a single external cue such as the ball, a target, or the rhythm of your movement.

As attention shifts, the task is not to correct the movement immediately, but to return attention to the cue.

This is where many athletes go wrong. They try to fix execution first, when in reality execution is often a reflection of where attention is placed.

The sequence becomes:

- notice the shift
- return attention
- allow movement to reorganize from there

From there, the training becomes relevant to competition by introducing pressure. This can be done through time constraints, scoring, or competitive scenarios.

Now the same task is performed, but the environment changes how attention behaves. You may notice:

- attention collapsing inward
- attention jumping ahead to outcomes
- increased difficulty bringing it back

This is the point of training—not to maintain perfect focus, but to reduce how long attention stays disconnected.

Instead of trying to stay locked in, the focus shifts to:

- recognizing when attention leaves
- returning it more quickly

Improvement in this area does not feel like perfect concentration or complete control.
It shows up as:

- noticing sooner when attention shifts
- returning without frustration
- spending less time mentally disconnected
- mistakes carrying forward less

Over time, this leads to something very specific:
your performance stays closer to your actual level

Attention is often overlooked because it feels simple, but it determines:

- what you perceive
- how you process information
- how you respond

Under pressure, those elements become more important, not less.

When attention becomes more stable, performance becomes more reliable—not because you are trying harder, but because less is breaking down underneath it.

CAPACITY 2: REGULATING THE SYSTEM UNDER PRESSURE

Most athletes are aware that their body changes under pressure. Breathing shifts, heart rate increases, and muscles tighten. But what's often missed is how directly these changes affect execution.

When the system becomes over-activated, even slightly, it begins to interfere with:

- timing and coordination
- pacing and rhythm
- clarity in decision-making

This is why performance can feel rushed, tight, or slightly out of sync, even when nothing has changed technically.

Most athletes respond in one of two ways:

- they try to ignore what they're feeling and push through it
- or they try to calm themselves down completely

Neither approach is very effective.

Ignoring it allows tension to build. Trying to eliminate it often takes you out of the competitive state entirely.

What you are actually training is something more specific:

- the ability to recognize your level of activation
- the ability to influence it without stepping out of performance
- and the ability to stay organized while it's elevated

The goal is not to be calm.

The goal is to be regulated.

The starting point is learning how your system responds.

In a controlled setting, begin by bringing attention to your breathing. Without forcing anything initially, just notice:

- is your breathing shallow or deep
- where do you feel tension in your body
- how quickly does your pace increase when you add intensity

This awareness becomes important because regulation is not possible without it.

From there, you begin to introduce control.

A simple way to do this is through breath:

- inhale through the nose
- exhale slightly longer through the mouth

You're not trying to slow everything down dramatically. You're simply creating a small shift that helps your system settle without losing readiness.

The next step is bringing this into movement.

During drills or practice:

- maintain awareness of your breathing
- notice when it shortens or speeds up
- subtly extend your exhale while continuing to perform

This is where the skill develops.

Because in competition, you won't step away to reset. You need to be able to regulate within performance, not outside of it.

As you introduce pressure—through competition, time constraints, or evaluation—you'll begin to see more clearly how your system responds.

You may notice:

- tension building more quickly
- breathing becoming shorter or irregular
- your pace increasing beyond what is useful

Instead of trying to override this, you begin to work with it.

The focus becomes:

- recognizing the shift
- making small adjustments
- staying engaged in the task

Improvement here doesn't look like feeling calm all the time.

It shows up as:

- less tension carrying from one moment to the next
- more consistent tempo and pacing
- fewer moments where you feel rushed or tight
- quicker return to a usable state after disruption

When regulation improves, performance doesn't feel forced.

It feels more organized, even when the environment is demanding.

CAPACITY 3: HANDLING INTENSITY WITHOUT SHUTTING DOWN

Pressure doesn't just change how you think or feel.

It changes how much intensity your system can handle.

Most athletes fall into one of two patterns when intensity rises:

- they become overwhelmed and lose control
- or they subtly pull back to avoid that feeling

Both reduce performance, just in different ways.

Overwhelm tends to look like:

- rushing decisions
- forcing execution
- feeling sped up or chaotic

Pulling back is more subtle:

- hesitating slightly
- not fully committing
- playing more cautiously than usual

What you are actually training is not confidence in the traditional sense.

You are training:

- your capacity to experience intensity
- your ability to stay engaged while it's present
- and your ability to continue executing without avoidance

The key to this is exposure—but done correctly.

If pressure is too low, nothing changes.

If it's too high, the system shuts down or reinforces avoidance.

So training needs to be progressive.

Start with manageable pressure:

- light competition
- small consequences
- controlled scenarios

Then gradually increase:

- stakes
- speed
- unpredictability

During these moments, the focus is not on perfect execution.

It's on your relationship to the intensity.

Notice:

- when you start to rush
- when you want to pull back
- when you feel the urge to escape the moment

Instead of reacting to that, the work becomes:

- staying with the task
- continuing to engage
- allowing the intensity to be there without it taking over

A critical part of this is how you respond after disruption.

After a mistake or a missed execution, most athletes either:

- carry it forward
- or try to immediately “make up for it”

Both keep the system unstable.

Instead, the reset becomes:

- noticing the reaction
- reconnecting to something simple (breath, cue, environment)
- re-engaging in the next moment

Improvement in this area looks like:

- less avoidance of difficult moments
- less overwhelm when things speed up
- more consistent engagement under pressure
- reduced need to “protect” performance

Over time, intensity stops feeling like something you need to manage.

It becomes something you can operate within.

CAPACITY 4: STAYING CONNECTED (NOT FORCING PERFORMANCE)

Under pressure, one of the most common shifts is subtle but important.

Athletes move from:

- executing → to controlling
- responding → to forcing

This shift often happens without awareness.

But it has a clear effect on performance.

When you begin to force execution:

- movement becomes less fluid
- timing becomes less natural
- decisions become less clear

Even if effort increases, performance often decreases.

This happens because attention shifts away from the environment and into control.

Instead of responding to what's in front of you, you start trying to make things happen.

What you are actually training is:

- the ability to stay connected to the moment
- the ability to trust execution without over-controlling it
- and the ability to let performance emerge rather than forcing it

A key part of this is where attention is directed.

When attention is internal (mechanics, outcome), control increases.

When attention is external (target, environment, rhythm), execution becomes more automatic.

So training begins with shifting focus outward.

During practice, bring attention to:
- the target you're interacting with
- the timing or rhythm of movement
- the environment around you

This creates a different quality of execution—one that is less forced and more responsive.

Another useful approach is having a single reset cue.

This might be:
- your breath
- a visual target
- a simple phrase or rhythm

When you feel yourself starting to force or overthink, you return to that cue.
Not to fix everything—but to reconnect.

You can also design training in a way that reduces the ability to over-control.

This includes:
- small-sided games
- reaction-based drills
- variable or unpredictable environments

These force you to respond rather than control.

Improvement here doesn’t look like trying less.

It looks like:

- more fluid movement
- clearer decisions
- less tension in execution
- greater adaptability in changing situations

Over time, performance feels less like something you are trying to produce and more like something you are allowing to happen.

HOW THIS ALL COMES TOGETHER

These capacities don’t operate independently.

They work together.

When attention becomes more stable:
→ you see and process information more clearly

When your system is more regulated:
→ your movement stays organized

When you can handle intensity:
→ you remain engaged when it matters most

When you stay connected instead of forcing:
→ execution becomes more natural and consistent

This is what allows your performance to reflect your ability more reliably.

Not because you are trying harder in competition,
but because less is breaking down underneath it.

Most athletes spend years developing their physical skills.

Very few spend time developing the internal capacities that allow those skills to remain available under pressure.

This is the difference between:

- performing well sometimes
- and
- being able to rely on your performance when it matters

This is the layer most athletes never train—and the reason their performance isn’t always there when it matters. If you want to build this into how you train and compete, this is the work I help athletes do.

About the Author

Kate Allgood is a mental performance coach and founder of Quantum Performance. She works with athletes across professional and elite levels to help them perform more consistently under pressure.

Her work focuses on training the internal capacities that allow performance to remain available when it matters most.

Learn more:
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